

O 051403Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9926
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY
AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY
AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY
AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000495

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [PREF](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: EMBASSY SHARES IMAGES OF SAFE ZONE WITH
PRESIDENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4
(b & d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a May 5 meeting with President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona, Charge provided satellite images taken since April 27 of new shelling damage within the Government-designated "safe zone."

The President maintained that Government forces have not been shelling into the "safe zone" since his April 27 statement announcing the end of heavy artillery and aerial bombing in this area. In a meeting with Foreign Minister Bogollagama the previous day, Charge provided other satellite images and inquired about reports of Government shelling in the safe zone. The Foreign Minister insisted that satellite images did not provide information needed to determine the source of fire. End summary.

12. (C) On May 4, Charge met with Foreign Minister Bogollagama to discuss reports that Government forces were shelling into the Government-designated "safe zone" even after the President's April 27 declaration of the end of combat operations. Charge presented two declassified satellite images taken on April 26 and 28 of the civilian "no-fire zone" showing probable artillery impact craters. Referring to widely-circulated but unofficial UN estimates of thousands of civilian deaths and injuries since late January (which have elicited strongly-worded refutations by Government officials), Charge noted that the U.S. is not in position independently to verify numbers of civilian casualties, but that it is clear there have been many. Bogollagama replied (implying the LTTE had shelled its own positions) that the satellite images did not provide enough information to indicate the source of fire.

13. (C) On May 5, President Mahinda Rajapaksa held a meeting of Co-Chair Ambassadors. Charge took the opportunity afterwards to pull aside President Rajapaksa and Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona to share privately satellite images released for this purpose by Department. The President noted he had already seen the images Charge provided to the Foreign Minister the previous day. Charge informed the President and Foreign Secretary that he had been instructed to share these satellite images with the Sri Lankan government. These "before and after" satellite images dated April 27 through May 3 document apparent shelling damage in the "safe zone" even after the April 27 declaration by President Rajapaksa, he noted. Charge stated that we were sharing the satellite images in the hope the shelling would stop.

14. (C) Rajapaksa responded by saying that before government forces occupied about half of the Government-designated civilian safe zone, the LTTE did not allow civilians to enter the southern end of the zone, as the LTTE had established bases in that area. The President further asserted there was no hospital in the area where the LTTE has claimed a hospital was shelled on May 2. (Charge countered that it was a makeshift facility.) Kohona noted (without specifying a precise time frame) that government forces had indeed bombed this area before unilaterally declaring it a safe zone because there were LTTE "Sea Tiger" bases along that strip of coast.

15. (C) The President then claimed that Government forces would not shell civilian areas, confiding that the Army has Deep Penetration Units (Tamil-speaking agents operating in LTTE-controlled areas) within the safe zone who are attempting to organize people to breach the LTTE earth berms and allow civilians to escape. Rajapaksa stated that casualty rates among Government forces have gone up because they are not responding with heavy weapons to outgoing heavy weapons fire from the LTTE. He commented that the military believes the graves documented in the satellite images are likely for LTTE cadres killed in action. Kohona added that there was little reason for the Government continuing to shell the safe zone, since "such sporadic shelling would not serve any military objective." He referred to an article on the Defense Ministry website alleging that the LTTE had staged photographs of the damage at the hospital.

16. (C) Charge inquired how the Government currently intended to pursue the end game of its campaign against the Tigers. Rajapaksa stated that Government forces will proceed slowly, without proceeding to a final assault, believing that they could secure the surrender of the remaining LTTE combatants within a few weeks. Rajapaksa insisted that the Government does not plan, however, to give the LTTE any breathing room to reorganize.

17. (C) COMMENT: At the beginning of the preceding meeting with Co-Chair Ambassadors (septel), the President asked Charge for an assessment of the current situation, noting wryly, "you are probably better informed than I am." Post considers it possible that individual field commanders or the Army command might have resorted to the use of heavy weapons while protecting the Commander-in-Chief from this information. Rajapaksa has been known to call individual battlefield commanders in the past to ask for frank assessments when he feels out of touch with ground realities. While the senior officials we spoke with concerning the satellite images conceded nothing, our effort still could lead to the President conducting his own inquiries and a possible change of the Sri Lankan Army's conduct of the battle in progress. The President remarked at lunch before this meeting that India had satellites and was monitoring the ground situation in Sri Lanka. It will now be equally clear to the Sri Lankan government that we are watching, too.

MOORE